Slideshow: The surprising hell of Bangladesh's toxic leather tanneries

by The America Tonight digital team (/profiles/d/the-america-tonightdigitalteam.html)
Of all the difficult, dirty and dangerous jobs Bangladeshis do to survive, these men just might have the worst: They are tannery workers, who work engulfed by the nauseating stench of toxic chemicals and rotting animal flesh. America Tonight

**On Tuesday's America Tonight, Al Jazeera's Rob Reynolds reported from Bangladesh on what happens when authorities make no attempt to enforce laws designed to protect the environment and people. Watch an excerpt from his report ([http://author-aljazeera-prod.adobecqms.net/content/ajam/watch/shows/live-news/2013/12/toxic-tanneries-createdeadzoneinbangladeshwaterway.html](http://author-aljazeera-prod.adobecqms.net/content/ajam/watch/shows/live-news/2013/12/toxic-tanneries-createdeadzoneinbangladeshwaterway.html)).**

It's no secret that Bangladesh is one of the world's poorest countries and that its laborers earn some of the lowest wages. Its garment factories' dangerous working conditions have been well-documented ([http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2013/11/14/bangladesh-strikeswageincreasedabalbutprotestskeeprolling.html](http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2013/11/14/bangladesh-stikeswageincreasedabalbutprotestskeeprolling.html)). But there's another industry in the country that is even more threatening to workers' health and the environment: tanneries that produce leather for clothes, shoes, handbags, jackets, belts and luggage sold around the world.

Tanneries are an important industry for the destitute country, accounting for more than an estimated $600 million in exports each year. About 90 percent of it is produced in Hazaribagh, an area in the capital of Dhaka that just last month was rated among the five worst toxic threats in the world ([http://www.worstpolluted.org/docs/TopTenThreats2013.pdf](http://www.worstpolluted.org/docs/TopTenThreats2013.pdf)) by the Blacksmith Institute.

The chemicals used in the tanning process can cause cancers of the lungs, nose and bladder, according Dr. Kahlilur Rahman, a radiologist at Dhaka University.

And while the cheap Bangladeshi labor lowers the cost of leather goods sold in wealthy countries like the U.S., Japan, Spain, China, South Korea, Italy and Germany, there is a price paid in the human misery of Hazaribagh.

"This is a product that is used worldwide for luxury goods, but for these workers who are making them, neither the owners nor the government are looking after our health and safety," Abdul Malek, head of the Tannery Workers Union, said through a translator.


"This is because the government wants only to buy the argument of earning foreign export," said Syeda Rizwana Hasan of the Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association. "So I would say this is a case of total absence of governance."

For years, the Bangladeshi government has promised to move the tanneries out of the densely populated slums of Hazaribagh into modern facilities. But so far all those promises have remained unfulfilled.
Its latest plan calls for relocating the tanneries by the end of next year. Government officials did not respond to Al Jazeera's repeated requests for an interview.

But the toxic threat of the tanneries isn't just limited to the workers. About 22,000 cubic meters of environmentally hazardous liquid waste is emitted from them every day, flowing into the Buriganga River, Dhaka's main water way.

Scientists say the Buriganga is a dead zone, and there have been no in-depth health studies done on the people living in Hazaribagh who use it as a water source.

"If you come to the Hazaribagh tanneries and have a look at the tannery area, that should tell you perhaps how hell looks like," Hasan said.

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